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### Reflections on the Life and Art of the Chagossian Painter Clément Siatous

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### **Depopulating the Chagos Archipelago**

The Chagos Archipelago is a remote group of coral atolls in the middle of the Indian Ocean. Located more than 1,750 kilometres east of the Republic of Seychelles, and about 2,200 kilometres northeast of the Republic of Mauritius, the archipelago consists of 65 tropical islands scattered in small clusters across the Great Chagos Bank. Along with other island groups in the Western Indian Ocean, the Chagos Archipelago was uninhabited prior to European expansion in the region. From the late eighteenth century onwards, French colonists populated Mauritius and its dependencies – including the Chagos Archipelago – with enslaved labourers from coastal East Africa and Madagascar. Following the Napoleonic wars, the British took control of Mauritius and its dependencies in 1815, emancipated enslaved labourers in 1835, and augmented the workforces with indentured labourers from British India.<sup>1</sup> In the colonial Chagos Archipelago, most labourers worked on coconut plantations producing coconut oil and dried copra for export (for use in the production of electricity and soap); others were engaged in fishing and the extraction of guano (which was increasingly in demand for use as a fertiliser on the sugar estates on mainland Mauritius).

Clément Siatous was born in 1947 to Chagossian parents living on Ile du Coin in the Peros Banhos Atoll. Documentary records are patchy, but recalling that his grandfather had an Indian name, Clément traced his ancestry back four generations to a man who arrived in the Chagos Archipelago from India. When Clément was five years old, his family moved to work on the largest Chagos island, Diego Garcia, where they lived until the 1960s. By then, the Chagos Archipelago had been continuously inhabited for almost two centuries. Their way of life, however, was about to come to an end.

During the Cold War, the US Government sought to establish an overseas military presence in the Indian Ocean, favouring the U-shaped Chagos island of Diego Garcia on account of its administration by British allies, its small and politically insignificant population, its central but isolated location, its natural harbour, and its potential to build a runway along one side (Vine 2009: 61). In exchange for what was in effect a US\$14 million discount on the Polaris missile system, the UK Government agreed to depopulate the Chagos Archipelago and make Diego Garcia available to the US military (Vine 2009: 87-88). In 1965 – as part of negotiations leading to Mauritian independence in 1968 – the UK Government excised the Chagos Archipelago from colonial Mauritius and created a new colony called the new British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT).

The residents of the Chagos Archipelago had been accustomed to making periodic voyages to Mauritius to renew work contracts, purchase supplies, receive medical treatment, give birth in a hospital, take holidays, or visit family. From 1965 onwards, Chagos islanders in Mauritius – including the Siatous family – were refused return passages and were told that the Chagos Archipelago had been ‘sold’ and the islands ‘closed’. Many Chagossians were thus stranded in Mauritius, in some cases separated from family members who had remained in Chagos. Meanwhile, on the Chagos Archipelago itself, proprietors gradually reduced the importation of supplies, wound up copra production, and did not renew employment contracts once they had expired. There was a gradual exodus from the islands. Eventually, the remaining inhabitants were forcibly removed from the Chagos Archipelago: Diego Garcia was depopulated in 1971, the Salomon Islands in 1972, and Peros Banhos Atoll in 1973. Of the former inhabitants of the Chagos Archipelago, about 1,500 ended up in Mauritius, and about 500 in Seychelles.

Mauritius gained independence in 1968, and Seychelles in 1976, but the UK retained the Chagos Archipelago. Moreover, to bypass international agreements drawn up in the UN Charter and thus circumvent their responsibility to protect the islanders’ interests, the UK authorities deliberately reframed the history of the Chagos Archipelago and its inhabitants. The Foreign Office represented the Chagos islanders as ‘migrant workers’ who could be ‘returned’ to Mauritius and Seychelles,

and not as 'permanent inhabitants' or an 'indigenous population' who would be 'evicted' by the UK Government from British territory to the soon-to-be independent states of Mauritius and Seychelles.

### **Clément Siatous: a displaced Chagossian artist**

By the time the Chagos islanders started to arrive at the docks in the Mauritian capital Port Louis in the mid to late 1960s and early 1970s, the country was in turmoil. A colonial policy of flooding the local labour market with indentured Indian labourers to keep wages at a minimum had resulted in high population growth coupled with high unemployment. A series of cyclones in the early 1960s had devastating effects on poor-quality housing, resulting in a severe shortage of housing stock, especially in densely populated urban areas. At the same time, the economy was almost entirely dependent on sugar export, and thus vulnerable to the vagaries of worldwide demand and prices. During the 1960s, a combination of high unemployment and ethnic tensions over independence gave rise to a series of violent clashes on the streets of the Mauritian capital Port Louis.

From the early 1970s onwards, displaced Chagos islanders in Mauritius carried out a series of demonstrations and hunger strikes to protest their forcible uprooting and the difficulties they faced in exile (Johannessen 2010: 74-77). In 1978 and 1982, after years of repeated protest, the UK Government awarded financial compensation to displaced Chagos islanders in Mauritius.<sup>2</sup> However, in many cases this money was barely sufficient to clear the debts that underemployed Chagossians had accumulated in the interim.

Like other Chagossian families, the Siatous family struggled with life in Mauritius. In the aftermath of yet another cyclone that left yet more Port Louis housing in ruins, the Siatous family moved to Cassis, a poor suburban district around the cemeteries on the western outskirts of the capital. By 1973, both of Clément's parents had died and been buried in Mauritius. Like many other displaced islanders, Clément did not have access to an education in Mauritius. After periods spent working on the docks and as a fisherman, he later supported his family by working as

a tailor and milliner. A tiny room at his workplace came to serve as his artist's studio, but he recalls constantly being short of painting materials.

Painting in his studio, Clément commenced what he saw as the central mission in his life: to depict the settled history of the Chagos Archipelago, illustrating life and work there before the archipelago was depopulated. Clément had, as he put it, 'reproduced things that appeared before my eyes' from the age of seven onwards, when living on Diego Garcia (Johannessen 2006). After arriving in Mauritius, however, Clément began systematically to record his memories of the Chagos Archipelago, motivated by the resentment he held against the authorities responsible for his marginalised condition in exile: 'I started portraying my memories from Chagos because the British Government said that there never existed any population in Chagos' (Johannessen 2006). Having never been taught to paint – 'I didn't learn it in school; I simply *can* paint' – he interpreted his artistic skills as a gift from God, a sign of his mission 'to tell the story of Chagos' (Johannessen 2006). Clément conceptualised his life's work as an important form of documentation disproving the UK Government's claim that there had been no settled population on the Chagos Archipelago.

After an exhibition of Clément's artwork in Port Louis in 1997, the then President of Mauritius, Cassam Uteem, recognised Clément's contribution to art by honouring him in 1998 as a Member of the Order of the Star and Key of the Indian Ocean (MSK). Clément subsequently outlined his main artistic ambition, which is to produce a total of forty paintings – including those reproduced here – based on his memories of life on the Chagos Archipelago. He hopes to raise awareness of the Chagossian plight by exhibiting his oeuvre in the UK and the US, and to raise money for disadvantaged children of Chagossian descent by selling painted reproductions of the original forty paintings.

Clément himself has remained on the periphery of the Chagossian socio-political organisations, but his artwork has often taken centre stage in the Chagossian political and legal struggle for compensation and the right to return to Chagos. Support for the Chagossian struggle has been bolstered by romanticised portrayals of the Chagos Archipelago and collective memory of the displacement in

oral narratives and song lyrics (see Jeffery 2011: 64-71). Clément's paintings, many of which adorn the walls of the Chagos Refugees Group (CRG) premises on the outskirts of Port Louis, enable the CRG to point visitors to specific visual representations of life and work on the colonial Chagos Archipelago, trappings of Chagossian culture, and collective memories of the displacement, as outlined below.

### **Life and work on the Chagos Archipelago**

Clément's realist style depicts the tropical Chagos Archipelago in bright colours and bold brushstrokes. Many of his paintings depict life and work on Chagos in the middle of the twentieth century. Several paintings show the hustle and bustle of everyday life against the backdrop of a characteristically Chagossian landscape. One such painting foregrounds children walking to school past a horse and cart and whitewashed buildings with red corrugated iron roofs representing the island shop, the church, and the administrator's residence. A second shows the islanders' basic huts with thatched roofs in the background; in the foreground, children play on a swing while women gather branches with which to make baskets and brooms. A third, with a crab on a coconut palm on the sidelines, depicts leisure activities on a sandy beach: preparing coconuts for consumption, playing with a friendly dog, and paddling in the sea.

A series of paintings by Clément show Chagos islanders engaged in all stages of copra production: gathering coconuts from the coconut plantations; stripping off the husks using a *pik* (a wooden stake topped with a metal blade); slicing open the coconut shells; extracting the flesh and drying in the sun or in the *kalorifer* (furnace); pressing dried copra into coconut oil; and loading bags of copra onto transit ships destined for Mauritius and beyond. Before attempting to paint islanders engaged in these activities, Clément tried to imagine himself in their places. A wooden stick in the corner of his small studio could for a moment function as a *pik*; by re-enacting activities from the islands, he allowed his embodied memories to guide his artistic representations. Pointing to his painting of the workers in the *kalorifer* he said: 'Taking a photo is very quick, but to imagine takes a long time. There are 45 people in there. That is a lot of imagining' (Johannessen 2006).

Like others who were brought up on Chagos, Clément was proud of his capacity to remember the activities involved in working on the coconut plantations. With his dual ability – both to remember and to paint – he saw himself as a Chagossian ‘explainer’ [*ekspliker*] (Johannessen 2006), whose responsibilities have gained importance over the decades in exile, since the number of Chagos islanders who are able to recall details about Chagos is in terminal decline. Hence, from Clément’s perspective, his realist style has an important pedagogical impact, since he points out that if Chagossians are ever able to return to Chagos in the future, his depictions may be of assistance to remind Chagossians and their descendants of important skills that have been lost during their absence from Chagos.

### **Chagossian culture in exile**

Chagossian cultural expressions reveal both cultural loss through displacement and cultural revival in exile, which were framed negatively and positively respectively. On the one hand, traditional Chagossian cultural practices – such as weekly *sega* music parties and a cuisine dominated by coconuts and fresh fish and seafood – were difficult to sustain in Mauritius, where the population was impoverished and geographically dispersed, and where coconuts are rare and fresh fish and seafood are prohibitively expensive. On the other hand, Chagossian cultural activities in exile – which emphasise continuities with practices on Chagos and mark Chagossians as distinct from non-Chagossians in Mauritius – have been central to Chagossian collective self-imaginings as a displaced community in exile (Jeffery 2011: 90-91). Recent Chagossian cultural revival in exile has centred on the promotion of coconut-based cuisine (particularly coconut milk dishes known as *seraz*), the production of the alcoholic homebrew known as *baka*, and the performance of Chagossian *sega* music and dance (see Jeffery 2011: 83-90).

Sited on a wall outside the house of the CRG leader Olivier Bancoult, a painting by Clément neatly encapsulates some of the key trappings of Chagossian material culture. At the far left of the painting is a basket made of green palm leaves next to a *rap koko*, the tool used to grate coconut flesh out of its shell, and at the far right is a man eating coconut. Edible local wildlife appears in the form of a crab and a

turtle. Out of a barrel pours *baka*, an alcoholic homebrew made from maize flour combined with the juice of soaked lentils, pineapple skin, and unrefined sugar. Musical instruments used in Chagossian *sega* music also feature: at the top of the painting is a one-stringed *bom*, and in the centre is a goatskin drum (*ravanne*) on which is depicted a woman dancer dressed in the outfit developed in Mauritius and worn by members of the CRG's musical ensemble, the Chagos Tambour Group (see Jeffery 2011: 84).

### **Displacement and return**

The Indian Ocean was a constant presence in the lives of the inhabitants of the tiny Chagos islands. Islanders used small wooden pirogues to go fishing and to travel to nearby Chagos islands, and they travelled back and forth to Mauritius or Seychelles on large transit ships. Many of Clément's paintings of Chagos depict everyday engagement with the sea, seabirds, sea creatures, beaches, pirogues, and other larger ships. He has also painted pictures name some of the transit ships that made the long journey between Chagos and Mauritius or Seychelles.

The *Nordvær* – the ship that made the final trips from Diego Garcia in 1971, Salomon in 1972, and Peros Banhos in 1973 – has been central to the development of a collective Chagossian historical imagination of the displacement, featuring strongly in song lyrics and oral narratives (Jeffery 2011: 68; 71). A painting by Clément shows the *Nordvær* leaving the Chagos islands abandoned. In a small boat next to the vessel is a party of British officials. Another painting, depicting the *Nordvær* on arrival in the Port Louis docks, forms part of an outdoor memorial at the very quay in the industrial harbour of Port Louis where the boats carrying the evicted Chagos islanders had landed in Mauritius. This painting of the *Nordvær* is juxtaposed – on the opposite side of the memorial, facing out into the ocean – with a painting by Clément that depicts the sandy beach in the lagoon of Isle du Coin in Peros Banhos Atoll, where he was born. (A painting of the same beach also decorates the front entrance to his family home in Cassis.)

As well as his numerous depictions of the *Nordvær*, which removed Chagos islanders from the Chagos Archipelago, Clément has also painted a picture of the



*Mauritius Trochetia*, which carried one hundred Chagos islanders on a brief return visit to the Chagos Archipelago in 2006. His painting, hanging in the CRG office, depicts the prospective Chagossian voyagers posing in front of the *Mauritius Trochetia* – moored in the quay next to the aforementioned memorial – before setting sail for the Chagos Archipelago. The painting was based not on Clément's memory but on a photograph of the event. The commemoration of the departure of the *Mauritius Trochetia* on this historic visit focused political and media attention on the Chagossian struggle, and Clément was frustrated that the Chagossian leadership did not invite him to exhibit some of his paintings to mark this important occasion.

Many Chagossian return visitors found that their short trip to Chagos evoked conflicting emotions: they were overwhelmed by returning to their homes after such a long absence, by the overgrown islands and derelict buildings, by the brevity of the visit, and by the fact that they could not remain there. Clément himself declined the opportunity to go; he understood, he said, that Chagos had been completely transformed in the absence of its former Chagossian residents. His primary task, he felt, was to depict life and work as it had been on the islands in the past, rather than the sad state of the abandoned and deteriorating villages and cemeteries in the present. Besides, he added, 'through my work I have already undertaken the journey' (Johannessen 2006).

### **The Chagossian struggle and the future**

Since the displacement, Chagossians in exile have struggled for compensation and the right to return to Chagos. Through their struggles they were awarded limited compensation in 1978 and 1982 and a series of brief return visits for islanders in the past decade, but they have not yet been awarded adequate compensation or the right to resettle the Chagos Archipelago. In 2002, under the British Overseas Territories Act, the UK Government awarded UK citizenship to Chagos islanders and their second-generation children born outwith Chagos. Since then, over one thousand people from the extended Chagossian community – including Clément and his children – have used their European Union citizenship to emigrate from Mauritius

and Seychelles to start new lives, mostly in the UK (see Jeffery 2011: 98-100). Clément has not yet resumed painting, but he lives in anticipation of taking up his paintbrush once again in pursuit of his artistic ambitions. Meanwhile, he is attempting to transport his collection of paintings from Mauritius with the aim of exhibiting his work in Europe, where he hopes that his work will have a positive impact on the Chagossian struggle for compensation and the right to return to the Chagos Archipelago.

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<sup>1</sup> The ethnically diverse population of mainland Mauritius differs from the populations of its dependencies. The Chagos Archipelago (and the other dependencies of Mauritius) continued to be numerically dominated by enslaved labourers from Africa, and later by their descendants, known as Creoles or Afro-Creoles. By contrast, by the mid-eighteenth century, indentured labourers from India comprised two-thirds of the population of mainland Mauritius by the mid-eighteenth century, a proportion subsequently maintained by their descendants, known as Indo-Mauritians.

<sup>2</sup> Displaced Chagos islanders in Seychelles have never yet received any financial compensation.